

# A JOURNEY THROUGH THE NATION'S BODY: TOBIAS SMOLLETT'S «THE EXPEDITION OF HUMPHRY CLINKER»

## ABSTRACT

Il saggio offre brevi considerazioni sull'efficacia della metafora corporea per una lettura su diversi livelli di *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. Nello specifico ci si soffermerà (i) sul fluido statuto generico del romanzo e sulla sua posizione all'interno del *corpus* del romanzo inglese settecentesco; (ii) sull'atto di scrittura e lettura del "corpo della nazione" considerato in relazione alla struttura complessiva del romanzo; e (iii) sulla relazione città/campagna per come si configura nella descrizione di Londra che, si suggerisce, può essere letta in relazione *The English Malady* di George Cheyne. Sia per la sua *Scottishness* sia per la pratica della «medicina per corrispondenza» (WILD 2006), Cheyne rappresenta un interlocutore privilegiato per comprendere diversi aspetti di *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*.

In this essay, I will offer some brief considerations on how the bodily metaphor is particularly apt to a critical reading of Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* on several and diverse levels. More specifically, I will focus (i) on the fluid generic status of the novel and on its position within the *corpus* of eighteenth-century British fiction; (ii) on the writing and reading of the nation's body considered in its relationship with the structure of the novel; and (iii) on the city/country relationship as it emerges in the description of London, which, I suggest, can be read in parallel with George Cheyne's considerations in *The English Malady*. In fact, as I will argue, for both his *Scottishness* and his practice of «medicine-by-post» (WILD 2006), Cheyne is a key figure to investigate several aspects of *Humphry Clinker*.

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Published in 1771, Tobias Smollett's last – and most famous – novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* has recently prompted renewed critical interest. The new critical edition, edited by Evan Gottlieb and published in 2015 by Norton, bears witness to the multiplicity of critical responses that Smollett's novel has continued to elicit, which have addressed issues ranging from *Scottishness* in a renewed perspective (GOTTLIEB 2005; ROTHSTEIN 1982) through the relevance of alternative geographies to transculturation (SUSSMANN 1994) and remediation as a way of addressing the peculiar epistolary form of the novel (MANN 2012-13). These interpretations all provide new elements to address the medical and bodily subtext of the novel, which remains a central issue in studies on Smollett and on *Humphry Clinker* more in particular, due to Smollett's acquaintance with medical discourse and practice.

In this essay, I will offer some brief considerations on how the bodily metaphor is particularly apt to a critical reading of the novel on several and diverse levels. More specifically, I will focus (i) on the fluid generic status of the novel and on its position within the *corpus* of eighteenth-century British fiction; (ii) on the writing and read-

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## I. THE CORPUS OF FICTION, THE BODY OF THE NOVEL

The fluid generic status of Smollett's last novel has long been troubling critics.<sup>1</sup> A kind of "strange body" within the *corpus* of eighteenth-century fiction, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* has been ascribed to diverse novelistic genres, as John V. Price has well summarized in his study on the structure of the novel: «Smollett has fused elements of the epistolary novel, the travel book or travelogue, the seventeenth-century "character sketch", the spiritual autobiography, and even the expository essay» (PRICE 1973, p. 8). Furthermore, the novel has been labeled as "picaresque", on account of the «device of a journey motif used as a vehicle for social satire» (SPECTOR 1968, p. 128, quoted in PRICE 1973, p. 17). Yet, as Price objects, one is left to wonder who the *pícaro* is, since no character really qualifies as such. Loretta Innocenti ([1997] 1999, p. 201) has focused on the importance of Jerry Melford's function as both «point of view and of uttering», thus placing the novel within the humoristic<sup>2</sup> tradition. In more recent times, Wayne Wild has suggested that *Humphry Clinker* also be read as an instance of «medicine-by-post», which he defines as «the eighteenth-century practice of medical consultation through the exchange of letters between patient and physician» (WILD 2006, p. 7), whose main exponents were James Jurin, William Cullen and Bath physician George Cheyne.

Therefore, as John V. Price notices, «one occasionally suspects that iconoclastic Tobias Smollett loaded his work with several literary forms and formulas in order to combat a process of labelling and categorizing» (PRICE 1973, p. 8). Yet, one also wonders how this "combat" is carried on and what kind of "narrative contract" (ROSA 2008)<sup>3</sup> Smollett offers his readers. While Smollett's use of the "editor" is perfectly in

<sup>1</sup> In the very same way, Smollett himself has often been a problem for historians and critics of the novel, who place him neither with the founding fathers of the novel nor with Sterne.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the word "humoristic" as used in SANTOVETTI 2004, p. 193 to account for the tradition of modern novel writing founded by Sterne. No coincidence that the adjective, seldom used in English literature on the subject, has become a sort of keyword in Italian scholarship through the work of Giancarlo Mazzacurati, author of *Effetto Sterne: la narrazione umoristica in Italia da Foscolo a Pirandello* (1990) as well as translator and editor of the Italian edition of *Humphry Clinker* (SMOLLETT 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Often strategically placed at the beginning of the novel and entrusted to the novel's editor, the "narrative contract" presents the conditions under which the act of reading should take place. The narrative contract performs therefore a key function in terms of genre as shapes the reader's horizon of expectations (see ROSA 2008, p. 11).

keeping with the tradition of the novel in the wake of Defoe and Richardson (MAYER 1992), at the same time, in the very same way as he does challenge the novelistic tradition that associates the name in the title to that of the actual protagonist of the novel (Clinker, as we know, is *not* the main character, the book is *not* about him), Smollett also challenges the tradition of the single editor, the figure often in charge of laying out the narrative contract for the reader. In fact, *Humphry Clinker* features two editors: Reverend Dustwich, who has come into possession (although he will not say how) of the letters, which he has decided to edit and have published, and publisher Davis, who, after refusing Dustwich financial conditions and complaining that «Writing is all a lottery», that «The taste of the town is so changeable» voices his skepticism about publishing the letters as travel literature: «Then there have been so many letters upon travels lately published—What between Smollett's, Sharp's, Derrick's, Thicknesse's, Baltimore's, and Baretti's, together with Shandy's *Sentimental Travels*, the public seems to be cloyed with that kind of entertainment» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, pp. 2-3). The bookseller thus invites a reading beyond the most obvious one, suggested by the title of the novel and stresses the “openness” of Smollett's last novel.

Beside the “doubled editor”, however, there is another relevant detail in the two letters that open the novel: for Reverend Dustwich, a Welshman like Matthew Bramble, has physically met the Scot Lismahago at a certain point, *after* the conclusion of the story narrated in the letters. In fact, he has had a violent confrontation with him during a dinner and does not hesitate to define him as a «vagrant foreigner as may be justly suspected of disaffection to our happy constitution, in church and state» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 1)<sup>4</sup>. Thus, after the reference to a minor character in the title of the novel, in its the very first pages we are introduced to another minor character, and one who, just like Clinker, does not write any of the letters but is given, at least in these two letters, considerable attention. This fact undermines, right from the beginning, the “leading” voices of the character who actually get to write the letters, thus inviting the reader to question the relationship between the written (re)construction of a character and his/her physical existence, that is to question issues of embodiment connected to the representation of the nation's body and its diverse “components”. As Sharon Alker observes, «Through the complicity of a Welsh clergyman, and a London bookseller, who appears to be Anglo-Welsh, the letters that explore reconciliation between the Anglo-Welsh and the Scots have been appropriated and transformed into a commodity» (ALKER 2002, p. 99). The commodity is the very book the reader is about to peruse.

<sup>4</sup> From his very first appearance, Lismahago is the “strange body”, both physically (he has been mutilated during his war days) and spiritually (both Dustwich and Jerry define him as a Jesuit in disguise: Respectively «he is no better than a Jesuit», p. 1 and «Mr. Lismahago answered with a sort of Jesuitical reserve», p. 192). Dustwich's definition of Lismahago as «vagrant foreigner», moreover, rings a Shakespearian bell to the reader's ear, who is reminded of Othello, the «extravagant and wheeling stranger». In fact, this association is confirmed further on in the novel: when Lismahago tells his story, «Tabitha *did seriously incline her ear*; – indeed, she seemed to be taken with the same charms that captivated the heart of Desdemona, who loved the Moor *for the dangers he had past*» (SMOLLETT 1984, p. 194).

A final remark has to be made on the puzzling title of the novel: critics have already commented on the use of the word “expedition”, in its double meaning of “journey” and “setting in motion, liberation”. Yet, the word also has another meaning, which was already in use during the eighteenth century: “expedition” also meant “the action of issuing or sending out official documents” (*OED*). The letters printed in the novel are, indeed, no official documents: still, the suggestion of a “character” being issued inasmuch as he/she is written about is definitely relevant in a novel that, from its very first pages, demands from the reader the ability to move back and forth between the different levels of the narration, as well as between the body, the action of writing it and the one of reading it.<sup>5</sup> The considerations on the opening letters of the novel have highlighted the crucial nexus between genre, the diverse voices present in the novel, writing and questions of nationhood. I will now focus on some examples to explore this nexus further, and to show how structural and formal elements of the novel evidence it. In particular, the following paragraphs I will focus on (i) the “national theme”; (ii) the genre of “medicine by post” to address the relation between the country and the city.

## II. THE NATIONAL THEME

*The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* has often been read as a novel that negotiates the complex relationship between England, Wales and Scotland in the aftermath of the Act of Union. A Scot in London, editor for *The Briton*, propagandist for king George III and the ministry of the Scottish Lord Bute, and editor of the influential *Critical Review*, Smollett was a keen supporter of the Union (see SORESENSEN 2000, pp. 104-138). In *Humphry Clinker* he addresses the issue of Scottish anti-prejudice in order to debunk it. As William Franke (1972, p. 97) has convincingly shown, *Humphry Clinker* is indeed a «party novel to vindicate the Scots», as Horace Walpole had noticed. Franke shows how such a claim is supported by the very structure of the novel: the two main leading voices «usually differ in England. What amuses Melford, annoys Bramble. In Scotland, however, the opinion coincide» (FRANKE 1972, p. 100), since the main function of the “Scottish part” of the novel is to provide information on Scotland. Even

<sup>5</sup> On this aspect see Mann, who starts from the double meaning of *remediation* as both “remedy” (cure) and “mediation” of a medium: «While the epistolary novel is by 1771 already a familiar form of remediation [...] *Humphry Clinker* makes the reader hyperaware of the letter’s status as remediation by having each letter shift, without response, to another letter written by a different member of the Bramble party. This strategy disrupts attempts to read the letters as forming a seamless narrative progress; further, it makes visible the remediation of the “original” correspondence, which has been reorganized and transferred to print» (MANN 2012-13, p. 380). While Mann focuses on the novel’s «signs of its [own] mediation» (MANN 2012-13, p. 380), focusing on the episode in which Launcelot Grieve is mentioned, and on the one in which Smollett himself makes his appearance, I think that the same procedure can apply to the novel’s complicated and demanding beginning. Moreover, in this connection I think that it is relevant to notice that *Clinker* delivers sermons, which brings our attention on orality vs. letter writing.

more significant, Franke remarks, is that the letters reporting the initial conversations with Lismahago, which happen at an inn before the group reaches Scotland and mainly deal with Scottish culture and language, are a group by themselves (1972, p. 101). These letters are all but one-sidedly ironical and introduce a shifting and multi-layered attitude towards Lismahago and his "Scottishness". In the wake of Franke's contribution, Eric Rothstein has shown how even the bodily characterization of the same Humphry Clinker – namesake of the novel – is heavily connected to the issue of Scottishness.<sup>6</sup> In more recent times, Sharon Alker (2002) has shown how the choice of Wales as home to both Bramble and Reverend Dustwich is a way of finding an in-between space to mediate between Englishness and Scottishness at all levels in the text: Wales is not Scotland but it is equally distant from London (FRANTA 2016, p. 783). Last but not least, Evan Gottlieb, editor of the latest critical edition of the novel, has provided further evidence on Smollett's «scotophilia» (GOTTLIEB 2005) by mapping the philosophical underpinnings (Hume and Smith) of the Scottish discourse in the novel. *Humphry Clinker* has been therefore well established, within the eighteenth-century novelistic canon, as a key text for the literary discourse on the new British Nation, a text negotiating the very shape and features of its body.

In this connection, I think two more relevant aspects have to be highlighted. The first one is structural: if we look at the three-fold structure of the novel, we notice that Volume I covers Clifton and the Hot Well, and Bath, that is places of cure and leisure, and ends with the company's arrival in London. Volume II is set between London and the North, with significant stopovers in Harrigate and Scarborough, while Volume III is mainly set in Scotland, apart from the final letters, which, significantly, bear no indication of place, as if it was meant to establish a universal place where social order is somehow restored *after* the exploration of the nation's body.

Such division also highlights the key role played by the city (London, Edinburgh) in gaining a view of the nation's body, yet a view that, as we will see shortly, is not free of contradictions. No coincidence, then, that writing the nation emerges as a key concern in a crucial site of the novel, that is, on occasion of Jerry's visit, in London, to the house of Mr. S\_\_\_, Smollett himself. Jerry's description of a Sunday lunch at S\_\_\_'s can be read as a *mise en abyme* of the novel's attempt to "write the nation": in fact, the company of the «unfortunate brothers of the quill» (SMOLLETT 1984, p. 124) is composed of various

nations and dialects [...] We had the Irish brogue, the Scotch accent; [...] The Scotchman gives lectures on the pronunciation of the English language, which he is now publishing by subscription. The Irishman is a political writer, and goes by the name of my Lord Potatoe. [...] Opposite to me sat a Piedmontese, who had obliged the public with a humourous satire, intituled, *The Balance of the English Poets*, a performance which evinced the his intimacy with the great modesty and the taste of the author, and, in particular, his intimacy with the elegancies of the English language (SMOLLETT 1984, pp. 126-127).

<sup>6</sup> Rothstein maintains that to readers of Smollett's time, Clinker's and Lismahago's «bare buttocks» would surely remember the staple images used by anti-Scottish propaganda.

Placed as it is at the very beginning of Volume I, the Sunday lunch scene, which occupies a very long letter by Jerry, offers a reproduction of the polyphony that characterizes the novel. Furthermore, by providing several details on the bodily features of the guests as well as on the food consumed, it resumes, from a different perspective, the nexus between city, writing and the body that is central in Bramble's letters from London.

### III. CURING THE NATION: HUMPHRY CLINKER AND «MEDICINE-BY-POST»

All throughout the novel, and especially in Bramble's London letters the discourse of the state of the nation is conducted by means of metaphors that address the relationship between the body, food and changes in the nation. Bramble's letters, as already suggested, can be framed within the genre of "medicine by post". Although Smollett presents a correspondence *in absentia* of the doctor, since Lewis never answers the letters (the actual "medicine-by-post" is never provided), medical discourse is predominant in Bramble's account of the city. Bramble is a «satiric persona who describes and responds to reality in fictional terms» (SENA 1975, p. 38), and his acquaintance with medical jargon and discourse should not come as a surprise: in fact, as Wild argues, «[p]atients were not only adept at keeping up with both the current state of medical knowledge but also with the fashionable jargon of their physicians» (2006, p. 19). Bramble therefore incorporates in his letters – and so does Smollett in his novel – the new medical rhetoric that became fashionable in the course of the eighteenth century and that is closely connected to the rise of the novel of sensibility.

Smollett's incorporation of "medicine by post" in his novel, and the specific bodily images used in the London letters, invite a connection with the famous *English Malady* (1733), by Scottish physician George Cheyne. Although *The English Malady* is not technically "medicine-by-post", its success and currency were such that its pages might well have been incorporated in subsequent works, and therefore also by Smollett himself.

Born in 1671 in Scotland, George Cheyne became a medical celebrity in London, thanks to a skilful understanding of the trends in medical studies of his time. A disciple to Archibald Pitcairn and a committed iatromechanist trying to apply Newtonian principles to medicine, he diagnosed himself hypochondria after his move to London, and through his personal experience he contributed to redefine the boundaries of this pathology in his *English Malady*, giving a role of prime importance to nervous diseases and establishing a very interesting link between them and sensibility, a word which would become crucial for the literary world of the eighteenth century. His peculiar blend of sound Newtonian knowledge, classical medicine, and a medical journey understood both in personal and national terms made his treatises a milestone in the history of British culture: as Jonathan Wild well summarizes, Cheyne offered to his public «a prismatic representation of themselves, of British society» (2006, p. 132).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed critical and biographical profile see Roy Porter's introduction to the *English Malady*.



### III.i London between Cheyne and Smollett

To all these Considerations, if we assume the present Custom of Living, so much in great, populous, and over-grown Cities; *London* (where nervous Distempers are most frequent, outrageous, and unnatural) is, for ought I know, the greatest most capacious, close, and populous City of the *Globe* (CHEYNE [1733] 1991, p. 54).

Thus read Cheyne's lines on London, where, according to him and for reasons he is about to explain, nervous diseases are at their top. Relevant here is the adjective "over-grown", which recurs in Matt Bramble's description of the city, for example in: «But, notwithstanding these improvements, the capital is become an overgrown monster; which like a dropsical head,<sup>8</sup> will in time leave the body and the extremities without nourishment and support» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 87). Overgrowing, excessive swelling also due to obstruction and bad circulation of the fluids, indicated by Cheyne one of the causes for nervous disorders, is the hallmark of London.<sup>9</sup> A city grown very quickly and impressively since the last decades of the seventeenth century, London had not grown orderly.

The uncontrollable body of the city also affects the psychological and nervous life of its inhabitants: «All is tumult and hurry [...] one would imagine they were impelled by some disorder of the brain, that will not suffer them to be at rest» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 88). The connection between tension and nervous disorders is here evident, and Bramble concludes that «the whole nation seems to be running out of their wits» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 88), thus establishing a connection between pace, space, nerves and intellect. Bramble's words strikingly resonate with Cheyne's on the increase of nervous disorders:

All these together will, I think, be sufficient to account for the Frequency of *Nervous Distempers* of late. [...] The ancient *Greeks*, while they lived in Simplicity and Virtue were Healthy, Strong and Valiant: But afterwards, in Proportion as they advanced in Learning, and the Knowledge of the Sciences, and distinguished themselves from other nations by their politeness and refinement, they sunk into *effeminacy*, *luxury*, and *diseases*, and began to study *Physick*, to remedy those evils which their luxury and laziness brought upon them (CHEYNE [1733] 1991, p. 56)

Cheyne and Smollett are in some way pioneering in advancing an understanding of the urban experience in terms of nervous excitement and in establishing a link between urban growth and the rise of a certain mind-set, that would be interpreted one hundred and fifty years later by Georg Simmel in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1904), who would find his interpretation of late-nineteenth century urban experience. The modern city – such as the London of the eighteenth century was becoming – was indeed a

<sup>8</sup> Dropsy is also the disease from which Bramble suffers (see SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 19).

<sup>9</sup> Circulation is actually a main concern all through the novel: significant passages, on which we do have the time to deal with here, are to be found in the episodes set in Bristol and in Bath. Annika Mann (2012-13, pp. 367 and ff. also mentions Cheyne as well as Smollett's *Essay on the External Use of Water* [1752]) as bearing witness to the centrality of this aspect.

source of nervous overstimulation, but one that could have different consequences, in that it established a polarity – which would then run throughout modernity – between the city seen as a phagocytising or anyway violent experience on the one side and the city as the mine of progress and of modern forms of cultural expression.

In this context, the five senses play a central role, and smell and taste are particularly relevant. In his *English Malady* Cheyne depicts the filth of London:

the infinite Number of Fires, Sulphureous and Bituminous, the vast Expence of Tallow and foetid Oil in Candles and Lamps, under and above Ground, the Clouds of stinking Breaths, and Perspiration, not to mention the Ordure of so many diseases'd, both intelligent and unintelligent Animals, the crouded Churches, Church-yards and burying places, with putrifying Bodies, the *Sinks, Butcher-Houses, Stables, Dunghills, &c.* and the necessary Stagnation, Fermentation, and Mixture of such Variety of all Kinds of Atoms, are more than sufficient to putrify, poison, and infect the Air for twenty Miles round it, and which, in Time, must alter, weaken, and destroy the healthiest Constitutions of animals of all kinds (CHEYNE [1733] 1991, p. 55)

The overcrowded city, which may be compared to an overloaded body, is rotten and its circulation is stopped. This has appalling consequences on the inhabitants of the city, who bear the same symptoms in their bodies. Like Cheyne, Bramble has a very sharp eye for the putrefaction – and of the consequent stink – of London's body: «and I breathe the steams of endless putrefaction; and these would, undoubtedly, produce a pestilence, if they were not qualified by the gross acid of sea-coal, which is itself a pernicious nuisance to lungs of any delicacy of texture» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 119).

A few lines earlier, Bramble has defined London a «centre of infection» (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 119), and he has stated that the city requires adulterated senses:

What temptation can a man of my turn and temperament have, to live in a place where every corner teems with fresh objects of detestation and disgust? What kind of taste and organs must those people have, who really prefer the adulterate enjoyments of the town to the genuine pleasures of a country retreat? Most people, I know, are originally seduced by vanity, ambition, and childish curiosity; which cannot be gratified, but in the busy haunts of men: but, in the course of this gratification, their very organs of sense are perverted, and they become habitually lost to every relish of what is genuine and excellent in its own nature (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, p. 118).

Taste, taste for genuine food, becomes central at this point: the contrast between city and country, a hallmark of modern culture so exhaustively outlined by Raymond Williams, is sketched by both Cheyne and Smollett in terms of radical changes in food habits and taste. London's growth, above all its economic growth, brought about radical changes in the relationship with the British soil as a provider of food and changed the food habits of the English. Cheyne's treatise is vocal on this point:

Since our Wealth has increas'd, and our Navigation has been extended, we have ransack'd all the parts of the *Globe* to bring together its whole Stock of Materials for *Riot, Luxury*, and to provoke *Excess*. [...] *Invention* is rack'd, to furnish the Materials of our Food the most Delicate and Savoury possible: instead of the plain simplicity of leaving the Animals to range and feed in their proper *Element*, with their natural Nourishment, they are physick'd almost out of their Lives, and made as great *Epicures*, as those who feed on them ... and ... these Nerv-



ous Diseases are produced in the *Animals* themselves, even before they are admitted as food to those who complain of such disorders (CHEYNE [1733] 1991, pp. 49-50).

A paragraph later Cheyne complains about the massive use of foreign spices and sauces, adulterating genuine British taste: «Not only the materials of luxury, are such as I have described, but the manner of dressing or cooking them, is carried on to an exalted height» (CHEYNE [1733] 1991, p. 50). Bramble's views are strikingly similar:

At Brambleton-hall ... My sallads, roots, and potherbs, my own garden yields in plenty and perfection; the produce of the natural soil, prepared by moderate cultivation. The same soil affords all the different fruits which England may call her own, so that my dessert is every day fresh-gathered from the tree; my dairy flows with nectarious tildes of milk and cream, from whence we derive abundance of excellent butter, curds, and cheese; and the refuse fattens my pigs, that are destined for hams and bacon [...] The bread I eat in London, is a deleterious paste, mixed up with chalk, alum, and bone-ashes; insipid to the taste, and destructive to the constitution. The good people are not ignorant of this adulteration -- but they prefer it to wholesome bread, because it is whiter than the meal of corn: thus they sacrifice their taste and their health, and the lives of their tender infants, to a most absurd gratification of a mis-judging eye; and the miller, or the baker, is obliged to poison them and their families, in order to live by his profession (SMOLLETT [1771] 1984, pp. 120-121).

London's "madness", as Bramble and Cheyne seem to suggest, has very material – and bodily – causes. Still, it would be too easy if the cure for the disease could consist in a simple return to the country. Rather, writing the nation's body emerges as a way of connecting its various parts and to negotiate its boundaries.

Sara Sullam  
Università degli Studi di Milano  
sara.sullam@unimi.it

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